

Is leadership research betraying leaders?



If the purpose of research is to solve problems, then the question emerges of *what* the problem is and *who* has the problem. The purpose of medical research, for instance, is to provide those who practice medicine with knowledge that enables them to cure diseases, to relieve pain, and to enhance individuals' health. Medical research thus benefits patients.

I believe that the ultimate question in managerial leadership is this: how can managers act in order to enhance organisational goal-attainment? Thus I ask: Is current managerial leadership research relevant and helpful to managers? Private enterprises and public agencies are established in order to achieve specific goals. Managers' main task and prime concern is to contribute to the attainment of organisational goals. Arguably, the purpose of managerial leadership is to provide managers with knowledge that benefits organisations and their owners. Is this the case?

Organisations are social phenomena, and one of their universal characteristics is the presence of a goal or purpose. A goal is a description of a future, a desired state. Rationalistic organisation theory views the organisation as an instrument, that is, a rationally designed means for the realisation of explicit goals set by a particular group of people. In management and business administration, organisations are regarded as contrived entities that are established as vehicles for the owners and their goal-attainment. Some organisations, namely, business enterprises, are established where the owners are the prime beneficiary. **Goal-attainment** is therefore the central issue and the basic definition of effectiveness in management theory.

The firm – as one type of organisation – is perceived clearly and undoubtedly as rationalistic in theories of business administration and management. The firm comprises one or more individuals who pursue the goal of generating dividends from the capital invested. This very goal motivates its establishment. The major difference between private companies and public agencies is the motive behind the establishment. A private organisation is in operation because some individuals (or other organisations) have decided to invest their funds into it. It will be in operation as long as the owners wish it to continue and the market allows it. In contrast, a public organisation is in operation because a political decision has been made to establish it. The public agency remains in operation until a decision is made to cease its operations.

Rationalistic organisation theory and corporate governance highlight the relationship between the owners and managers. Shareholders need to delegate control to a few directors and managers who can run the company on their behalf. The main goal of the organisation is not an issue for the managers. For the manager the goal is imperative, an order. Managers do not exist for their own sake. They are supposed to serve the organisation's goal, and they, I hope, remain at all times subservient to it. Arguably, the purpose of managerial leadership research is to provide managers with knowledge that benefits organisations.

The purpose of [my article](#) was to assess whether current managerial leadership research is relevant and helpful to managers or not. I found five previously published studies that have scrutinised a total of 2,479 articles. [A study](#) narrowed down the focus of the four previous studies. Now, articles that included the term 'effectiveness' in the abstract or in the running text, or both, were scrutinised. On the basis of this premise of relevance, a survey of 105 research articles written by 282 researchers and published in two international leadership journals in year 2011 revealed that the term 'effectiveness' occurred about one time for every thousand words. It was seldom defined and never measured. It is, indeed, no surprise that six other studies have shown that managers regard leadership research both irrelevant and useless.

Managerial leadership research would be relevant if researchers were more explicit on which problem they address and specify who has the problem. In other words, the relevance for the organisation and thus for the manager, must be made explicit. What managers need to know is how to act and behave in order to enhance organisational effectiveness. In order to achieve this, the relationship between leadership behaviour and organisational effectiveness needs to be focused.

What kind of **study object** is organisational effectiveness? If it is defined as the degree of goal-attainment it is an *objective study object*. Consequently, it is imperative that the research is based on methods that measure organisational effectiveness objectively. In that way, and maybe only in that way, managerial leadership research can become relevant and useful to managers and thus for the organisations in which managers are appointed.

The five studies I referred to comprised almost two and a half thousand leadership articles. They reveal that leadership research is irrelevant and useless to managers. Six other studies also indicated they have shown that managers themselves perceived leadership research unhelpful. They *do not know* why leadership research is irrelevant and useless to them. What managers probably *do know* is this: betrayal is the oldest crime.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [Leadership research and the oldest crime](#), *Dynamic Relationships Management Journal*.
- The post gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Business Review, LSE Media Policy Project or the London School of Economics.
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